

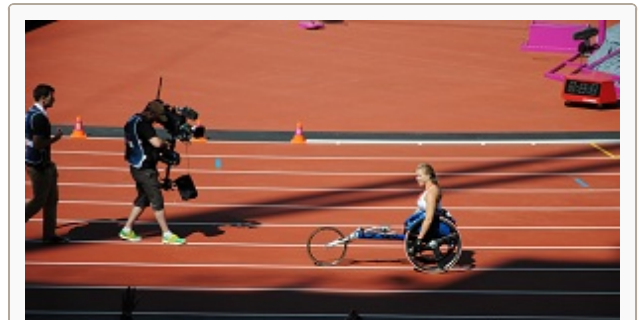
The Paralympics have the power to change attitudes towards disabled people

Richard Hawkes argues that the Paralympics, by allowing for greater visibility, presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stop and reverse the deterioration of attitudes towards disabled people.



The Paralympic Games are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the way society views disability. In the run up to the Games, the disability charity Scope wanted to do a temperature check, looking at attitudes toward disabled people. Shockingly, almost half of disabled people we spoke to felt that attitudes towards them have got worse and many have experienced aggression, hostility or name calling from other people.

Disabled people kept coming back to the same concern: benefit scroungers. They single out fraudsters, they are concerned about coverage and they told us that strangers challenge them in the street about the support they claim. Yet we know fraudsters are a tiny minority of claimants and it is telling that these figures come as the Government continues to put the issue of weeding out illegitimate claimants at the heart of its welfare rhetoric.



Team GB gold medalist Hannah Cockcroft/Credit: Marcus Yorke

The facts and figures they release on welfare reform only tell half the story. Benefit fraud is rare – in fact more money goes unclaimed than is defrauded, and the new fitness for work test is shown to be failing miserably to accurately assess people's likelihood of finding work. This backdrop of negativity will only make it harder for disabled people to overcome the many barriers they face when it comes to getting on with their lives.

That is why the Paralympics presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stop this deterioration and leave a lasting legacy of improved attitudes towards disability. The majority of disabled people and their families we spoke to also believe the games have the power to change the way disabled people are treated and viewed by society. A companion survey also reveals that 67 per cent of the general public will watch the Paralympic Games. The figure was 48 per cent when a similar poll was conducted before the Olympics. Taken together the findings show the Paralympics can have a real and lasting impact.

Disabled people and their families say greater visibility is the key to improving attitudes:

- 62 per cent say the Games have the power to change the way the public treats disabled people
- 76 per cent said a greater presence in day-to-day life would make a difference
- 86 per cent referred to the positive impact of greater public discussion about the issues affecting disabled people
- 87 per cent said more disabled people in the media would have a positive effect on attitudes

At a time when disabled people feel public attitudes have got worse, it is clear that they have high expectations for the games. Disabled people say they can change attitudes for the better.

But for the games to have an impact the general public has to engage. We were really pleased to discover that more than two-thirds are going to watch the Paralympics. This comes as the games look set to be the first sell-out Paralympics. The figures confirm that the wider public has few opportunities

to interact with disabled people and many disabled people are invisible in society.

The Paralympics present a unique opportunity to bridge that gap. A step-change in the way society views disability must be the real and lasting legacy of London 2012 for disabled people.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

Richard Hawkes is chief executive of the disability charity Scope

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